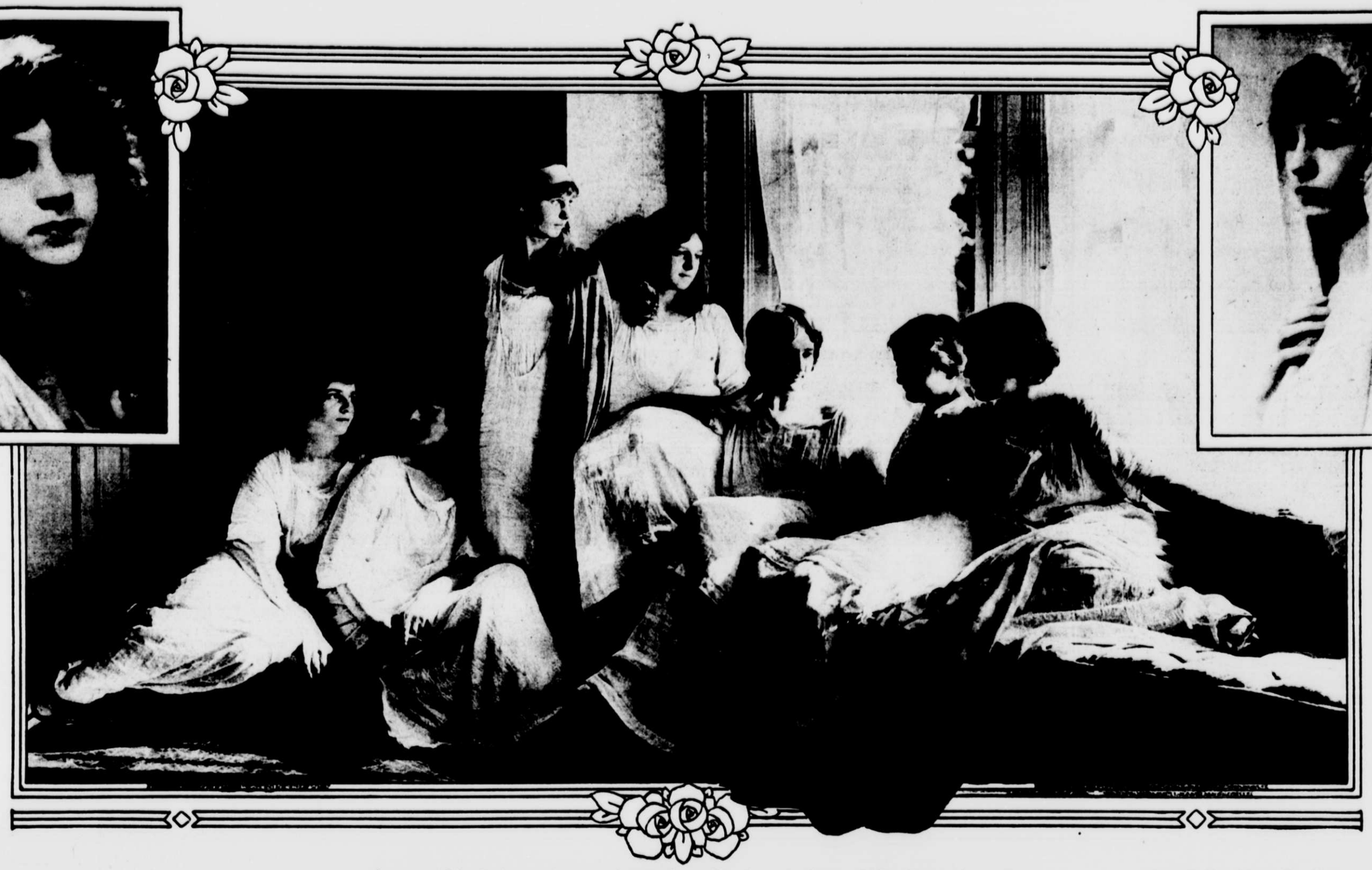
ISADORA DUNCAN PLANS FREE SCHOOL OF DANCING



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A group of Isadorians at home, and portrait studies (insets) of two of Miss Duncan's pupils.

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Hopes Little Group, Driven Here by European War, Will Remain as the American Branch of an International Chain

A VAST blue-gray stage, covering almost the entire floor space of the auditorium; great curtains of the same neutral shade, gracefully draped at the back and sides; a mysterious light falling from an invisible source upon the dancing figures of reincarnated Greek goddesses: thus did Isadora Duncan transform the Century Opera House, changing it from a theatre into an amphitheatre and turning its civilized artificialities into the natural beauties of classic art.

The "Duncan theories," the "Duncan cult" and the "Duncan school" have been vaguely discussed for years by people to whom the terms meant little more than Greek costumes, bare feet and a general freedom from the conventionalities of civilization. Now that the European war has planted the entire organization in the conservative lap of New York city a still more incoherent flood of conjecture, gossip and enthusiasm has been turned loose.

If Isadora Duncan is by instinct a dancer she is still more instinctively a teacher. With a life record of battling against the accepted order of things it has become a habit with her to impress her radical ideas upon any minds that she can possibly reach.

As a child in San Francisco she amused herself by inventing dances and teaching them to the other children, so that before long she was made a regular teacher in the dancing school conducted by her mother. Meanwhile she was herself acquiring every variety of technique by studying with one teacher after another, always appropriating what seemed good to her and discarding what was obviously bad.

A professional engagement as the first fairy in Augustin Daly's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" brought her to New York and London. But her independent ideas soon freed her from the restrictions of a theatrical management.

It was in an attempt to interpret the quatrains of Omar Khayyam that Isadora Duncan first evolved the scheme of combining words, music and dancing. When she presented this new type of art in London it was at once labelled "Greek." The coincidence led her to begin a systematic study of the life and art of ancient Greece. She copied the poses of the figures on Grecian urns, took note of details of costume and read every authoritative discussion of the Greek religious festivals.

But it was in Paris that her system, which had previously been vaguely experimental, became definitely and permanently fixed. Here she finally settled upon the simple costumes by which the beauty of the body should be enhanced instead of disguised. Here she decided that a plain background of a neutral shade was more effective than any scenery and that no stage properties were necessary beyond a few garlands of flowers or an occasional scarf of flaming color.

The stiff broken lines characteristic of the conventional ballet had given way entirely to the continuous curves which alone according to the Duncan theory are beautiful. Relaxation and imagination became the guiding principles of her technique.

Europe received the new art with spontaneous delight. A tour of the Continent and later of England resulted in a sudden multitude of "Greek dancers," the establishment of a "Greek cult," and the appropriation of the Isadorian ideas for every "cause" from dress reform to woman suffrage.

It was only after some years of successful performance in public that Isadora Duncan was seized again with the desire to teach her art to others. An unusually successful series of exhibitions in Germany led to the purchase of a large house in Grunewald, near Berlin, and the establishment of a permanent school.

Everything was in readiness for twenty-five children before the first pupil arrived; a schoolroom with twenty-five little desks, a dining room decorated in blue and white with places set for twenty-five, and a dormitory with twenty-five little blue and white beds, each with its blue and white mat alongside and a Della Robbia plaque on the wall, while twenty-five blue and white uniforms hung upon pegs, ready to be worn by twenty-five little girls.

In less than a month the school was filled to its capacity. Every pupil was completely supported by Isadora Duncan herself, the parents resigning the entire responsibility for the children's welfare, but with the understanding that frequent visits would be permitted.

The children, all of whom had to be between 4 and 9 years of age, were selected by a process of elimination, those who showed imagination, physical adaptability and a sense of rhythm being kept for a three months' trial, after which they were either regularly enrolled or finally dismissed. The strict German school regulations were obeyed in every detail, for in addition to the special instruction in dancing there was a full curriculum, including musical, gymnastic and religious training.

All this was exactly ten years ago, since which a branch of the school has been established at Darmstadt, and more recently a complete reorganization effected at Meudon, near Paris. The little girls of the early blue and white stage have grown up into miniature Isadora Duncans and are now doing their share of training the French, Russian, English and American children who joined the school last year.

The six star pupils who appear with Isadora Duncan in her exhibitions form an interesting group. They are known only by their Christian names. Anna, the eldest, is actively concerned with the affairs of the world about her. Therese and Irma come next, an impulsive and spirited pair. Lisel is long haired and long legged, physically the best dancer of them all.

Gretel is a thoughtful child, filled with a sense of her dignity and somewhat mystified with the American manner of doing things. Erica, being the youngest, is also the most serious. She has recently had her hair bobbed, but not quite so short as Isadora Duncan's. One must be conservative in such matters.

As for the little ones, their names must have been taken directly from the chorus of a Parisian operetta. There is only one boy, and he of course is Jean. Then the list reads Annette, Huguette, Yvette, Colette, Marie, two Valentinas (known as "big Vala" and "little Vala"), Alexandra, Minuka, Helen and Florence. They have all mastered the fundamentals of rythmic motion and are as graceful in their way as their elder sisters.

Scores of applications have already been made by American parents who wish to enroll their childrn in the Duncan school. But Isadora Duncan refuses to commercialize her project and prefers to wait until her own resources permit the establishing of an American branch similar to those abroad free for all children who prove themselves properly qualified.

If the ideal is ever realized there will be schools in Russia, France, England, America, and possibly Greece, with Isadora Duncan herself dividing her time equally among them and occasionally moving an entire group of pupils from one country to another.

Any one of the four oldest girls would be competent to conduct a branch of the school at present, but the entire plan must wait for the settling of Europe's troubles. The properties at Grunewald, Darmstadt and Meudon are all now being used as hospitals.

Meanwhile the Isadorians are pursuing the exposition of their art for the benefit of overcivilized Americans in the hope that eventually the seed now planted may grow into a permanent educational institution of practical as well as artistic value.

OVER 4,000 BARGE CHILDREN IN NEW YORK WHO NEVER GO TO SCHOOL

COENTIES SLIP on a wet day is a rather woeful bit of Manhattan's waterfront, and its scores of huddled canal boats seem rather to add to the flatness of that nook in the city's dockage. There they lay, yawning boxes in their utter emptiness or seemingly on the verge of sinking under their loads of gravel, broken stone and sand. Their truncated cargoes looked like the backbones of an array of trenches and all signs of animation were hidden as if for life's protection. At the far end of the nearest cargo of sand a bit of rusty stovepipe peeped above the ridge and a thin streak of smoke betrayed the presence of a habitation. It was all like a touch of the sodden battle lines abroad save that in this case the human denizens had not "dug in" to escape shot and shell.

Following the trail of that wisp of smoke the cabin of the canal boat was discovered snuggling close under the lee of the hillock of sand and presently the slide of the booby hatch was pushed back and a cheery masculine voice called out, "Won't you come aboard? You'll find it more comfortable than up there on the dock and out in the rain."

The skipper of the Mary Rose was right, and it was something of a revelation to the landsman to find how much cosiness and convenience could be arranged in a rectangular space about twelve feet square. The cabin was at once living room, bedroom, dining room and kitchen and the father, mother and three little ones were a smiling lot despite their rather crowded quarters. All three of the youngsters—the eldest less than five years old—had been born in that home, and possibly because of their tender years, did not yet reflect the worst side of life aboard the barges and canal boats that frequent our harbor.

"No, $60 a month is not much money, but the wife and kiddies have a roof over their heads; we get our fuel free besides and generally there is plenty of fresh air to make all hands hungry when meal time arrives. The only thing that troubles us is the coming of the day when the little ones will need schooling. Perhaps the canal boat does not move rapidly, but it gets around a lot, and this shifting makes it hard for our children to be taught regularly. Just the same I would rather be here than a fixture in town, and we can wait some years yet before bothering about the kiddies' education."

Now this happy-go-lucky attitude has its distressing consequences. The Federal Commission on Industrial Relations in investigating conditions around the city has revealed the fact that there are over 4,000 children living aboard barges visiting New York harbor who never go to school and who are in a fair way to reach maturity and be as illiterate as the run of their parents. With this illiteracy goes ignorance, and because of the conditions under which they are reared in their cramped homes there are physical and moral shortcomings of a distressing character and degree.

True, this state is more especially prevalent among the children of coal bargemen. Somehow with the dirt and grime of the cargo is bred slatternliness in the mothers and distressing habits among the children. This is not to be wondered at when at times as many as ten persons are crowded together in a single cabin measuring ten by fifteen feet.

Miss Mary Oakley Hay, for some years a visitor for the Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, declared a few months ago that of the barge people that came to the association for aid 40 per cent. were suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis, and that other bodily weaknesses, due to the circumstances of life aboard these craft, were very prevalent.

"In many cases from the day of birth the children aboard of these itinerant homes are exposed to perils and hardships. Indeed, this heritage antedates their very birth in the form of privations and exposures to which their mothers are subjected. The annals of our coastal coal trade show a shocking number of wrecked or foundered barges every year. When a storm proves too much for the laboring tug then the steam craft cuts the lines and sets adrift her utterly impotent tows. Sometimes the wave tossed barges are rescued or otherwise survive, but not infrequently the people aboard of them go down with their sinking homes or perish or suffer grievously in an open boat in a battle to reach a haven.

Again children may be sick aboard these barges and without medical attendance for days, or they may be brought into the world in the midst of a gale and under circumstances that make a physician's assistance impossible. Indeed, as many will testify, the rough, untrained services of the bargeman has had to suffice, supplemented by such help as his children could render at the time! Privation and an utter lack of privacy just when care and separation meant as much to all the offspring as to the mother.

And yet married men, and preferably those with families, are well nigh uniformly demanded by barge owners, because this combination gives them a firmer hold upon the men entrusted with the care of their property. The fear of being discharged and landed upon the dock in midwinter binds these employees to their jobs despite the meagre wages.

But all is not gloom in this floating population. Some of the canal boatmen either own or are buying their craft just as the suburbanite is winning a permanent home for himself. Up-state builders will fashion a 200 ton canal boat for $500 down and let the skipper owner pay the rest of it, say $2,500, by instalments at the rate of 6 per cent. interest. Over at Erie Basin there is now a great fleet of these cargo carriers making ready for the beginning of the spring and summer business. In a few weeks they will be loaded and bound up the Hudson and thence north to Canada via Lake Champlain or westward to Buffalo by the trail of the Erie Canal.

During the past winter the schools of Brooklyn have felt the influx of the wandering children of this flotilla, and now they long for their days of travel that will bring them in touch with scenes heard of only by most of their shore classmates.

To the city bred mother it is ever a marvel that these kiddies of the canalboats live to grow up with the constant menace of deep waters, but it is a curious fact that but few of the barge youngsters are ever drowned. The wee ones play at the end of a leash when the mothers are too busy to watch them, and somehow it is not long before the smallest of them learn to swim. This is the least of the dangers to which they are exposed. It is not always easy for the canalboat man to get pure water for drinking purposes, and here lurks the threat of typhoid. This is doubly so in the sewage tainted rivers about Manhattan, and while this water is used generally for washing purposes only still the germs linger and reach the vegetables and fruits in the larder.

The right kind of a canalboat mother, and there are a great many of them, believes her children better off in that floating home than others of like modest circumstances living ashore. She can always have her eye upon them, unless, unhappily, she has to board them ashore for the sake of schooling, and she is watchful of their moral well being and tries as far as possible to make them happy within their necessarily narrowed zone.

Watch the youngsters at play and it will be hard to find a more joyous lot, but to the shore mother their romping seems recklessly near sure death, with the sweeping tide swirling by. But those canalboat kiddies are a surefooted lot and, happily, they don't go overboard. The youngsters have plenty to occupy them and not a few of them boast their little gardens, where blazing geraniums and other flowering plants supply dashes of color, and even vegetables serve the double purpose of decoration and usefulness.

Indeed a fleet of these canalboats sounds like a floating barnyard at times as they are towed up and down the Hudson, for chickens are frequently to be found aboard as regular members of the household, while cats and dogs lend more animation to the atmosphere of domesticity.

The children born aboard barges are very much influenced by that environment. The boys generally follow in their father's footsteps, while the girls marry among the boatmen and thus perpetuate a distinctive class.

An impromptu school aboard a barge in Erie Basin.

Pushcart King of the East Side

HIS name is Samuel Witkin. He has been in this country just seven years and he is now making over $5,000 annually. He has over 200 customers; busy, early rising men who have implicit faith in his capacity and honesty. And yet his office has never seen a telephone, a stenographer or a bookkeeper. As a matter of fact his office is in almost total darkness throughout the day. The only article of furniture it possesses is a shiny stool, with one leg missing.

Mr. Witkin's customers are not rich men, far from it. A few of them make as much as five or six dollars a day, but the majority earn barely enough to keep them comfortably clothed and fed. And yet they are typical business men, of a certain sort, not only of New York, but of every big city in the land.

The rush hour in Mr. Witkin's business is about 6 A. M. Each day at this time a long line of his customers are waiting outside his place of business, and as soon as the doors are opened they file in, choose their wares, deposit ten or fifteen cents in Mr. Witkin's broad palm and issue forth to the fortunes of the day. They are a heterogeneous tribe of merchants, caparisoned in every vagary of misfit and picturesque raiment; and waiting to buy of them and of others in the same business is fully a third of the population of the metropolis.

Only two years ago Mr. Witkin was himself one of them, but that indefinable something which puts money in the pockets of some men worked happily for Mr. Witkin, and he soon found himself possessed of a thriving business, with time at his disposal and money in the bank.

What is Mr. Witkin's business? Go down along Avenue A or the Bowery any Saturday night and you will see lined up along the curbs thousands of venders with all kinds of wares; a wild riot of color and confusion. Every vender displays his goods from a small pushcart, and if you should ask one of them where the pushcart came from he would in all probability name the place of business of Samuel Witkin.

Yes, Samuel Witkin is familiarly known as the Pushcart King. His customers are men who ply the precarious trade of the street vender. Mr. Witkin now has 200 pushcarts, and he is constantly increasing his stock. His office is the basement of a flat on East Tenth street, dark and grimy, to be sure, but answering the purpose admirably. Here he has locked up every night 200 or more empty pushcarts, which the following morning will be trundling all over the various parts of the city filled with merchandise. In the summer he rents them for 15 cents a day and in the winter for 10 cents a day.

Seven years ago he landed at Ellis Island a raw, awe inspired young Russian. To-day he is making $5,000 a year, is happy and ambitious.